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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have linked reading aloud to preschoolers and these children's later success as readers. But some of the parents with whom teachers work, whether they work at Head Start, childcare centers, or primary grades, have limited reading skills. However, the Hispanic, Native American, African American, Irish American, and many other cultures in the United States have long histories of storytelling. Teachers can learn from these cultural traditions of storytelling, enhancing the literacy experiences in their classroom and providing an important home-school link. The child who is consistently exposed to an oral tradition of stories gains skills that prepare him/her for reading. Some of the most important skills children can gain are: (1) the concept of story; (2) the many strands of plot; (3) comprehension of vocabulary; (4) internalization of character; (5) visualization; (6) natural rhythms and patterns of the language; (7) figures of speech and metaphors; (8) prediction skills; (9) concepts about the world; (10) listening and attending skills; (11) internalizing their culture; and (12) healthy self concept. Since telling stories is a successful way to encourage literacy, it should be promoted in the classroom. Beginning storytellers can start by sharing their own personal stories, recounting daily events and elaborating on past experiences. A storytelling workshop with a master storyteller, where parents and teachers can learn the basics of storytelling together, can also be sponsored. Listening to storytelling tapes is another alternative. (Lists 11 storytelling tips; contains 17 references.) (NKA)

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Storytelling and the Emergent Reader

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"Tell me a story." Children from every culture delight in story time. We each remember with eagerness sitting at the foot of the storyteller, cuddling up with our reminiscing grandparent, going to the library for story hour. Every traditional society uses oral stories to acquaint children with their culture (Glimps, Simon, & Ashton, 1995). Stories introduce the children to heroes, give them an understanding of the flow of language, expose the listeners to their history, and teach the concepts important to that culture. The stories illustrate the expectations of the group, point the way for moral development and, of course, entertain.

> 'Remember only this one thing,' said Badger. 'The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves.' (Lopez, 1990, p. 48)

Teachers often advise parents to read aloud to their children. This is a valid suggestion. Numerous studies have linked reading aloud to pre-schoolers and these children's later success as readers (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Kontos, 1986). In fact, the number of hours that children are read to during their pre-school years is the best predictor of children's later reading achievement in school (Wells, 1986). Reading aloud to children not only increases reading achievement scores, but also listening and speaking abilities including the ability to use more

complex sentences, literal and inferential comprehension skills, concept development, letter and symbol recognition, and positive attitudes about reading (Silvern, 1985).

But some of the parents with whom teachers work, whether they work at Head Start, child-care centers, or primary grades, have limited reading skills. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) released in 1993, indicates that 21-23% (40-44 million) of U.S. adults are functionally illiterate (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993), meaning that they do not have the skills needed for everyday tasks such as filling out employment forms, reading a newspaper, or following written instructions. This study also revealed that young adults today are less proficient than those surveyed in 1985. Compounding this problem, 41% to 44% of the adults ranking lowest in literacy were also living in poverty. A study comparing oral and written language skills of pre-school children from low and middle income families, reported that low income parents, even when literate, reported reading to their children less, having fewer books, and offering less encouragement to read and write. Results indicated that children from low-income families were at a distinct disadvantage when compared to their higher income peers on many language concepts and that they fall further behind by the end of their pre-school years (Robinson, Smith, & Dixon, 1992).

The 1982 English Language Proficiency Survey (National Institute of Education, 1986) found that 37% of the adults who are illiterate speak a language other than English. However, 86% of these adults were also illiterate in their native language. Those who are literate in

languages other than English often have the added difficulty of accessing children's books in their native language.

However, in spite of these difficulties, these groups may have rich literacy environments due to the strengths they do possess-- their storytelling ability. The Hispanic, Native American, African American, Irish American and many other cultures in the United States, have long histories of storytelling. Teachers can learn from these cultural traditions of storytelling, enhancing the literacy experiences in their classroom and providing an important home-school link. We can also encourage parents to call on these strengths by suggesting they tell stories to their children on a daily basis. Even parents who do not have strong storytelling backgrounds can tell children stories about personal experiences. We are suggesting that the child who is consistently exposed to an oral tradition of stories gains skills that prepare them for reading. In fact, in many cases storytelling may actually be a more powerful medium in which to learn these skills. What are some of the most important skills we hope children will gain?

1. The concept of story-- A beginning, middle, and end is part of every story. Stories have a climax, sometimes a moral, and certainly a point to make even if entertainment is the primary purpose. A child intuitively acquires a sense that stories feature an adventure or a problem that will be resolved. The story can be a traditional one, such as the Gingerbread Boy, or one told by a parent or teacher about a real personal experience. Whether it is told or read the children will gather the ideas of plot, sequence, character, and theme (Jalongo, 1992).

2. The many strands of plot--One of the most important elements in a story is the unfolding of the story, the posing of a problem, and the solving of that problem. Plots include broad descriptions, details, and sub-plots. One of the big advantages of storytelling is that a story can grow with a child. As the child matures more detail can be added to fit the children's developmental level. The teller can observe the child, modifying the story instantly according to need (Isbell, 1979). For example, a quizzical look can signal a need to explain the situation more completely. Complex plots help children to conceptually be ready to learn to read about similar situations in books

3. Comprehension of vocabulary-- These words are not necessarily in the children's speaking vocabulary, but are words they understand in a context. Their listening vocabulary becomes quite extensive, gradually expanding as stories are told and retold. As the child matures the words take form. They realize that the meaning of a story can be conveyed even though they may not understand every word. Children have us tell the same story over and over because they gain more understanding with each retelling. The first time they hear the word "ogre" the listener may not understand it, but they guess it might mean huge, mean, or scary. As they encounter the word in different contexts it takes on more meaning.

4. Internalization of character-- The child begins to understand that a character is developed during a story and has certain consistent characteristics. Stories for young children are often one dimensional, representing good and evil. As children mature the stories have more developed

characters and they become more complex. Children cannot verbalize this, but because they have been exposed to stories they intuitively know that the people and animals that are in the story take shape and have a personality. In most stories there is a problem which the characters resolve. In the process their personalities evolve and develop. Usually this change in their personality represents a societal ideal towards which the children will be drawn.

5. Visualization-- Through words, the listening child creates mental images which the storyteller weaves together. Unlike television, movies, and videos which provide the images, reading and story telling both rely on being able to picture a scene, setting, a person, and a situation in one's mind's eye. Through words the listening child creates mental images which are primary for understanding the story.

6. Natural rhythms and patterns of the language-- Children exposed to stories acquire the rhythms and patterns of the language that surrounds them. Usually the patterns in a story are more unique than they would be in most spoken conversations so children are exposed to rich and unusual language structures. The storyteller embellishes the details with poetic and vivid descriptions. In American Indian cultures, as in other cultures, the storyteller has learned the stories he or she tells by heart from each story being handed down verbatim from generation to generation. The listeners internalize the ebb and flow of the language which surrounds them. Because of this maintenance of the story and its language the richness of the patterns are passed on to the children.

7. Figures of speech and metaphors—These are integral parts of a story that are often not part of daily speech. For example, when formal stories are presented to children they introduce the lyrical forms of the language. Children who hear stories have an extensive exposure to sophisticated language—which may be very abstract for a young child. Even though the children may not understand the figures of speech, they are learning how language can be used creatively and expressively. The storyteller enhances the story with lively similes. Some languages, such as Spanish and the English used in Ireland, have metaphors embedded in everyday speech. Children who come from these language backgrounds absorb these intriguing comparisons through their early nurturing. Gaining insight into these comparisons in a natural way provides experience with comparing and contrasting, an essential part of the future reading experience (Jalongo, 1992).

8. Prediction skills--The storyteller who entices the child with a fascinating story subtly teaches this all-important skill. When we tell a child a story with a repetitive line, such as in "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?" the child quickly learns the line and joins in. A child learns to anticipate what will occur next when listening to either a formal or spontaneous home-grown story. As language the richness of the patterns are passed on to the children.

9. Concepts about the world—Through stories children learn information about the world around them, which can help them to order their physical, emotional, and social environment. When

grandmother tells of her adventures while coming to the United States to escape a war ravaged country, her grandchildren learn about seeking justice and freedom. When a traditional storyteller entrances an audience with the history of their group, children gain a sense of history in an immediate and powerful way. The child learns about the modern adult world when the parent who comes home from work and recounts an interesting, exciting, or humorous event in colorful words.

10. Listening and attending skills--Learning to listen is often difficult. Children accustomed to story time learn this vital skill in a warm and friendly environment. "Storytelling is a powerful medium which captures children's attention because the process is personal, entertaining, and responsive." (Raines & Isbell, 1994, p. 264). The storyteller through eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and the ability to modify the story for the audience is able to keep the child's interest engaged, thus helping him to listen for increasing lengths of time. Being able to stay focused and on task is one of the most important gifts a parent can give a young child. (M. Mulroney, Personal Communication, June 1998).

11. Internalizing their culture--The United States is a land rich with immigrants who bring their varied cultures to this society. Sharing stories is one way that teachers and immigrants can keep their native cultures alive for their children. Listening to stories from a variety of cultures can help broaden the children's worldview, break down the mystery and fears of an unknown culture, and build awareness of the variety of the human experience.

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12. Healthy self-concept-- When an adult involves himself with a child in a positive way by sharing a story, whether personal, traditional, or modern, the child perceives herself as having worth. As a storyteller we can modify the story to meet the needs of the child. For example, the child can become the hero of the story. Because we are not tied to a book we can maintain eye contact with the child, reading their reactions and modifying the story accordingly. This intimate experience builds rapport between the child and the storyteller and lets the child know that they are worthy of our time and attention, thus building self-esteem. Since a story is often such an integral part of the storyteller, telling a story to an appreciative audience also promotes a positive self-esteem in the storyteller.

These 12 components are accrued by the children who are read to as well as those surrounded by a rich oral tradition. Those who are told stories may gain some additional benefits. In a study conducted by Isbell, (1979) young children were assigned to listen to a story reader or storyteller. Children in both groups were exposed to the same stories over an eight week period. At the end of this time, children were asked to retell a story. Those children who had listened to a storyteller told longer stories that were more sequential. They also used more diverse vocabulary and story conventions.

Children who have listened to storytellers have also learned in a very personal way that words are valued and shared. As Momaday states (1997) "One who has only an oral tradition thinks of language in this way: my words exist at the level of my voice. If I do not speak with

care, my words are wasted. If I do not listen with care, words are lost. If I do not remember carefully, the very purpose of words is frustrated."

Although storytelling is highly recommended as an effective teaching practice, teachers do not utilize it on a regular basis (Raines & Isbell, 1994). Since telling stories is a successful way to encourage literacy as well as a bridge to the home environment, how can we promote the storytelling tradition in the classroom? Beginning storytellers can start by sharing their own personal stories, recounting daily events and elaborating on past experiences. There are also many other stories that you probably know well enough to retell, for example, the folk tales. In learning new stories, wordless picture books, flannel boards, and puppets can assist one to remember the sequence of events. Pictures can be used as story starters.

You can also sponsor a storytelling workshop where parents and teachers can learn the basics of storytelling together through observing a masterful storyteller. Listening to storytelling tapes is another alternative. Providing a list of suggestions and tips like those listed below, is also helpful.

These are some basic areas which every storyteller takes into consideration.

-setting the environment for storytelling time. You might have a special hat, a candle, a shawl, or a special rug you sit on to announce story time.

-whether to use props or not. Some stories need props, such as the story "Little Round Red House with No Windows and No Doors and a Star Inside" which requires an apple to be cut

crosswise in order to find the star. Other stories can be told using a flannel board, puppets, one or two props to suit the style of the teller. Most stories do not use props; the storyteller's voice and gestures are the whole medium.

-how will the storyteller indicate which character is talking. This can be done by moving one's head to show which character is speaking or by moving one's position. Of course one can also change one's voice.

-all stories have a beginning, middle, and end; a plot with a problem to solve; and/or action with a conflict.

-how to begin and end the story. Stories often begin with a set phrase. For example, a favorite among English speakers is " Once upon a time". We like to begin with "In times long ago, and places far away". Each teller can create his or her own opener. For the beginning storyteller, whether an adult or child, bringing a story to a close is often very difficult, so the teller ends up rambling. One simple way to end a story is by saying, "the end". However if the teller wants a little more stylized ending, such as the common one, "and they lived happily ever after" she can make up her own phrase such as, " They learned so much." Another way is to end a story by asking a question, "How do you suppose…." "How would you have liked the story to end?" "What will the future bring?"

-making eye contact. It is important to establish a relationship with your audience while telling the story. Look around; avoid telling the story to just one or two people if there is a group.

--knowing the story well. It is not advisable to memorize a story. But it is important to know the outline so that you can tell it in a natural way. Occasionally, we do want to memorize a certain phrase which is repeated. For example in the Gingerbread Boy, "I can run away from you I can I can, I ran away from..."

--gestures can be an important part of a story. The teller will want to think about what gestures are essential. We don't want to make gestures for every little event, but we want to use them for dramatic effect. The Bear or Lion hunt will use a lot of action, but The Little Red Riding Hood mostly will rely on the final stage when the wolf gobbles up the little girl.

--timing, using pauses, when to speed up and slow down for effect. This is up to the story and the storyteller. To create excitement speed up, for suspense slow down.

--character needs to be developed. In home-grown stories characters are more frequently multi-dimensional in comparison to traditional fairy and folk tales. Home-grown, personal stories can assist children, especially older children to take a world view that is not black and white, but with shades and nuances.

--the type of story to tell. There are many different types, the porquoi or why tale, the cumulative tale, talking beast tales, fables, myths, legends, humorous tales, traditional fairy and folk tales, stories based upon real life experience, etc. Favorites of children are stories which include the child as a character in the story.

As teachers we can encourage parents to tell more stories. Storytelling is a way that

information has been shared throughout human history. Even those parents who do not come from a cultural background that has encouraged storytelling, have most likely been involved in relating significant happenings to their children. Encourage parents to continue and expand their storytelling. Storytelling can occur at the dinner table, while driving to school, or at any other time that the parent spends time with their child. Open houses, conferences, and newsletters all provide avenues to share with parents the value of storytelling as well as some of the basic techniques and types of stories which can be shared. "Children listen to stories from someplace deep inside, especially if the story comes from the heart of a parent or grandparent. Knowing them as we do, we can create stories that hit the developing minds of our children better than most books on the shelf" (Collins, 1992, p. 23).

We can invite parents and community members into the classroom to tell stories. These stories can be taped for classroom or home listening. They can also be transcribed and we can create books for children to read, thus, linking the written and spoken word. This not only increases the children's literacy but also demonstrates to parents that we value them and their storytelling. Having evenings where children, parents, and community members come to school to share stories is another way of promoting the storytelling home-school link.

For beginning storytellers, we can have a collection of wordless books in our classroom lending library. Different stories can be told using the same pictures. These props may help the

reluctant storyteller begin. The collection can also include video and audio tapes of storytellers, which the parent can check out.

Finally, we want to encourage children to share their stories. As with parents, encouraging storytelling can assist the child in seeing the link between school and home as well as providing important literacy skills. Studies also indicate the children, like their parents, do tell stories. One study conducted by Preece (1987), a mother who taped the kindergarten children while car-pooling, found that the three children produced 337 stories. Fox (1993) also studied young children's storytelling, finding that children explore present, past, and the future in their stories. Children explore these different tenses as their own understanding of time grows. At first children's use of tense is often unclear but gradually as they reach school age their use of time in their speech and storytelling becomes more defined.

How can we assist children in storytelling? Sometimes parents and teachers only half listen to children's stories because children meander. If we listen carefully we can retell the child's story in a more organized fashion. The child is then encouraged to think of story patterns-making their story more interesting. If we use props such as flannel boards or puppets with our stories, this may aid children in retelling the story. Engaging in interactive stories is another technique to help children learn to tell a story. The teacher or parent begins the story, children add new ideas, dialogue, or continue the story. "By making storytelling an interactive event we

can help children feel comfortable enough in storytelling to be confident of their own emergent narrative ability, to take risks, to elaborate, to invent, to explore, and thereby to grow" (Trousdale, 1990, p. 173).

"By developing a storytelling-reading-writing-changing-acting-drawing-sharing culture at the center of classroom activities in the early years, they will find that children themselves, through their responses to stories and their story inventions, reflect what they know and love most" (Fox, 1993, p. 194). Unifying home and school storytelling enriches the lives of all.

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